

**Comparing Comparisons:
Insights into Ethnographic and Text-Based Methods
Based on Case Studies of Four Chinese American Women**

A Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction

Although I will be graduating from a ‘Comparative Studies’ department, this will be my first attempt at a comparative paper. Perhaps it was the strong influence of an anthropologist who was prone to a particularistic point of view, but in the past, I have had a fairly dismissive attitude toward comparison. In every one of my classes I was somehow able to find a ‘particularist’ method of studying and writing, and thus often went about my research in a deliberately non-comparative way. I recently realized I had yet to explore and/or attempt to write any sort of comparative paper myself and as to not completely reject comparison before even trying, I decided to use this undergraduate thesis as a means to explore the topic and write my first ‘comparative’ paper. Because paper will focus on the utility of using comparative methods when studying “religion” and “culture”, I think a note on these terms is necessary. These words have a history of both being slippery and controversial in terms of their definitions and usages. Many religious and cultural studies scholars have spent much time on their definitions, but for now, I propose that we bypass those discussions and use a standard conceptualization of them both.

This thesis is set up in two parts. The first part explores the scholarly debate about the utility and necessity of comparative methods and the second part will consist of my own comparative projects. The hope is that, at the end, I will be able to answer certain questions about comparative methods and techniques. For me, the most important questions that need to be answered are: What is the point of setting up research in an overtly *comparative* way? Does comparison always have to lead to generalizations and universals? If comparing is about similarities and differences, are we looking for

instances of similarity to show universality, or are we looking for differences to show uniqueness? Is it possible to discuss universals and historical context together? Is there any correlation between the topic of research (i.e. religion) and skepticism about the utility of comparison? Is there any correlation between methodology of research and skepticism about the utility of comparison? If one decides to write a comparative paper, how does one 'do' it?

If I am able to answer these questions, I think it will allow for greater clarity and perhaps new ideas about the utility of cross-cultural comparison. In the first part of the thesis, I will begin by looking at how scholars are discussing comparative methods and examine how they are answering the above posited questions. Then in the second part, by attempting to write a comparative paper of my own, I will try to find my own answers and come to some of my own conclusions about the utility of comparative methods.

Part I. Thinking Comparison

In my experience, most scholars with whom I have come into contact give the impression that comparative methods have gone ‘out of style’. The trend seems to have shifted away from comparative techniques and toward the particular, which, to a lot of people, is a shift away from similarity and toward difference. This first chapter looks at some of the scholars who are actively championing the merits and utility of using comparative techniques to study religion. In 2001, the journal *NUMEN* devoted an entire issue to the topic of comparison, a forum for scholars who wished to defend comparison from all the critiques and criticisms. My goal is that, by looking at what the scholars who are using comparative methods are saying, I will be able to answer the above mentioned questions and better understand what is at stake in the debate about comparison.

Robert Segal: Generalizations, Universals and Comparison

The first article I would like to explore is Robert Segal’s “In Defense of the Comparative Method”. In this article he discusses the relationship of comparison to generalizations. One of the foremost criticisms about comparative methods is that comparative projects focus on similarities and thus share the goal of showing that everyone is the same. When the similarities are spotlighted, the differences can come to be seen as insignificant. Clifford Geertz, one of the well known critics of comparative methods, argues against comparison for just this reason: because comparative projects too often have generalizations as the final outcome. Geertz sees these universals and generalizations as inaccurate, banal and/or empty. He writes,

Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart

from them....[S]tated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant (Segal, 342-3).

To Geertz, what matters is not necessarily what humans have in common as much as the differences.

[T]he notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share. Is it in grasping such general facts—that man has everywhere some of “religion”—or in grasping the richness of this religious phenomenon or that—Balinese trance or Indian ritualism, Aztec human sacrifice or Zuni rain-dancing—that we grasp him? Is the fact that “marriage” is universal (if it is) as penetrating a comment on what we are as the facts concerning Himalayan polyandry, or those fantastic Australian marriage rules, or the elaborate bride-price systems of Bantu Africa? (Segal, 343).

Therefore, for Geertz, it matters less that something like marriage is a universal quality of human life, and more that the particulars of a certain place and a certain point in time can allow for a better understanding of that particular situation. Geertz is in opposition to any project that sets out to show similarity across cultures. Nonetheless, Segal points out that it is not necessarily the comparative method to which Geertz is opposed but “What counts is that his opposition to generalizations is his opposition to the comparative method” (Segal, 344).

In regards to other critiques about comparison, Segal notes that others have criticized comparative methods either for generalizing prematurely or for generalizing at all. In response to the notion that comparison leads to a premature generalization, Segal writes:

Comparisons are always considered provisional, not conclusive. Comparisons are subject to correction or abandonment, as new facts arise. The failure of existing generalizations is scarcely an argument against generalizations per se....Because generalizations are

recognized as tentative, the comparative method does not generalize prematurely (Segal, 351).

Segal maintains that the critique that comparative methods always end in generalizations or universals is actually a result of scholars not realizing the significance of similarities and differences, and not a result of the methods being innately flawed. To Segal, comparative methods are capable of illuminating both similarities and differences. It is just that, to date, most comparativists have chosen to focus on the similarities.

Another point that Segal addresses comes in regards to the particular versus general. Melford Spiro, a supporter of particularism, wrote:

The distinctive anthropological approach, the source of its strength and weakness alike, is a contextual one. Social phenomena can only be understood, according to this methodological stance, in their historical uniqueness, that is, as the products of culturally parochial forms, structures, and processes. Similarly, the goal of such studies is to explain why the people under investigation differ from other peoples with respect to the subject of one's inquiry, rather than to discover a set of principles that might explain the range of phenomena of which it is only one variant (Segal, 341).

But to Segal, the idea of ever having a complete picture or ever being capable to allow for the complexities of a 'particular' time and place is problematic. He thus views the selectiveness of a generalist and a particularist as being of "only one of degree" (Segal, 352), by which he means that generalists must often pick elements to compare but particularists are also faced with the infinite complexity of situations, and thus must also select what they want to research and write about. Later Segal writes,

The comparative method is often confused with the assumption of universals—as if it stands committed to similarities not merely across cultures but across *all* cultures. In actuality, the method requires the *search* for multiple instances of a phenomenon but allows for the *discovery* of even just one. Still, unless the explanation given of people X would apply to any other people in kindred conditions who did offer these sacrifices, the explanation fails to explain even the sole

case to date of people X. In short, the way to understand people X is not merely by myopically studying them more and more. It is also by studying other peoples as well (Segal, 358).

Segal is insistent that comparison should only be seen as useful or not useful, not right or wrong or too broad or too narrow. For Segal there is no need to change comparison or comparative methods; neither is there any need to be critical of those comparing; the problem merely lies in the critics' misunderstanding and misuse of the comparisons and the generalizations. And therefore, to Segal, comparative projects do not necessarily end with the general or universal. He writes, "The comparative method is itself neutral. It is a tool, to be used by either particularists or universalists" (Segal, 348).

Benson Saler: The Inevitability of Comparison

Benson Saler, unlike Segal, is critical of the close relations of comparison and universals. He is weary of universals but sees comparison as an inevitable aspect of human cognition and unavoidable in scholarship. Consequently, in his article, "Some Suggestions for Improving the Inevitable", he proceeds to lay out ways to improve upon comparative methods. He wants to give an alternative way of thinking about comparison that will not necessarily always end with universals. As to why comparison is inevitable, he writes:

Comparison is vital in certain of the activities of the mind-brain. We regularly monitor the world, and in doing so we creatively and selectively compare newly encountered phenomena to established representational structures. Comparative processes are thus of crucial importance in cognition (Saler, 268).

For Saler, because it is impossible not to use comparison in researching, there is no point discussing whether or not comparing has any utility; he moves directly to how we can improve techniques of comparing and also improve upon the type of conclusions

we draw from these comparisons. He discusses the “problem of universals” (Saler, 271) in philosophy and writes that although the universals that philosophers discuss differ from those in social sciences, he sees the same problem as pertaining to both, namely, “How do we justify applying the same general term to a diversity of particulars?” (Saler, 271).

Saler agrees that often by positing universals, comparisons can be too simple, not allowing for the complexities that exist within situations, and thus universals are not just to be ignored, but rather something to be worked with and improved upon. After looking at Donald Brown’s discussion of universals, Saler concludes that although he agrees with Brown’s supposition that universals are always based upon limited cases, he still cannot embrace them. Saler writes:

Now, despite Brown’s sophistication and general good sense, I am uncomfortable with the notion of human universals.....[I will be] proposing that instead of talking about human universals we speak about natural resemblances, and that instead of attempting to identify cultural universals we look for cultural resemblances (Saler, 270).

The important shift for Saler is that we should be looking for “natural resemblances”, not universals. He quotes the philosopher H.H. Price on the critical difference between universals and resemblances:

The question is, what sort of a structure does a class have? That is where the two philosophies differ. According to the Philosophy of Universals, a class is so to speak a promiscuous or equalitarian assemblage. All its members have, as it were, the same status in it. All of them are instances of the same universal...But in the Philosophy of Resemblances a class has a more complex structure than this...Every class has, as it were, a nucleus, an inner ring of key members, consisting of a small group of standard objects or exemplars[and] every other member of the class should resemble the class exemplars as closely as they resemble one another (Saler, 272).

Saler wants to shift the question of “What might be human universals?” to “What might be significant natural resemblances among humans?” (Saler, 272). Besides allowing for comparisons to have greater complexity, subtlety and become more realistic, Saler notes that resemblance theory seems to be supported by cognitive science in terms of “prototype effects” and connectionist theory. The importance of looking for natural resemblances and not universals is that resemblances not only allows for both similarity and difference, but also accents the broad spectrum of these similarities and differences. In this way comparison allows for the diversity of the situations while also giving us a way to discuss the similarities without jumping to the conclusion of universality.

While the term “universal” may connote something “out there” that is independent of cognitive mediation, “resemblance” suggests a judgment that *someone* makes, and makes within a mediating framework (Saler, 273).

The main objective of Saler’s article is, for one, to show that comparison is inevitable in cognition and thus should be seen as unavoidable in scholarship and, for two, that because of its inevitability, comparative methods need improvement in order to avoid projects concluding with universals. For Saler, the way to evade universals is to look for human resemblances.

Jeppe Sinding Jensen: ‘Conceptualism’ as an answer

“Universals, General Terms and the Comparative Study of Religion” by Jeppe Sinding Jensen begins by discussing how much of the anti-comparison, anti-universal attitudes of today’s scholars arise from looking at earlier versions of comparison, seeing or determining that these studies were flawed, and then quickly dismissing any type of comparative method. He writes,

Against detailed empirical studies comparative studies are always bound to get something wrong, to be too general and superficial. In that sense the critique from particularists and empiricists is justified, but such critique may serve the wrong purpose and be based on the wrong premises (Jensen, 239).

Similar to Saler, Jensen is both concerned with the definition of universals and also shows how scholars of religion might look to philosophy for help. He borrows a definition from philosophy:

A universal is a property or relation that can be instanced or instantiated, by a number of different particular things: each yellow thing provides an instance of the property of yellowness, and each square thing the property of being square. The things covered by a universal are thus similar in some respect. The general questions asked about universals include: are they discovered or invented? How are we to think of something that has itself no spatial position, yet is instanced at many places and times? What is the relation of instantiation? Can sharing the same property be analyzed in terms of resemblance? How does the mind perceive the general property as well as the particular instance? (Jensen, 242).

Where Jensen is highly distinctive is in his notion that studies of religion are actually dependent upon generalizations and universals. In this way he is very different from Saler. His article's main objective, then, is to demystify universals and illustrate their necessity in the study of religion.

For Jensen, all the problems related to universals are themselves products of history, and thus he points out that the ability for humans even to make history is actually also reliant upon universals. He does not think that universals equate to identity, but that universals just mean similarity, and are a place to begin with comparison. He writes,

The acceptance of the existence of surface differences among societies, cultures, and religious traditions does not necessarily entail a surrender to doctrines of incommensurability, incompatibility, or comparability on the part of the scholar. One of the problems in the discussions concerning universals is that they have frequently been considered the opposite of history, namely "eternal", but such dualism

is itself a product of history. It is then more interesting to attempt to explain why it is that the human ability to have or to *make* history in itself requires the existence of universals. Anything that is historically specific and culturally relative is so only because it is a human project and therefore comparable—even the most historicist and relativist study is only possible on the premises of the “psychic unity” of humankind. Universals warrant comparability, but they do not entail or imply identity (Jensen, 241).

Jensen finds the problematic manners of Western thought at fault for the dilemmas in the conceptualizing universals. “The commonsense idea that ‘universals’ are identical things that must be discoverable all over the world is an illusion produced by the ‘reifying’ modes of ‘Western’ thought” (Jensen, 247). Jensen disagrees with Saler insofar as using natural resemblances is an alternative to universals. To him they are both metaphysical and thus ‘universal’ does not at all imply something ‘out there’ any more than a natural resemblance.

Thus universals are not empirical objects operating in empirical mechanisms, but they are the properties of entities, complexes, processes, functions, and structures. They are the predicates that may apply to more than one thing and *none* of these predicates is a “physical” item of the world. I shall not elaborate on such concepts as “identity”, “class”, “resemblance”, “difference”—for what are *they* if not metaphysical?(Jensen, 247-8).

In the debate about universals, the two ends of the spectrum for Jensen are (a) the position that universals are either pre-existing and thus discoveries that allow for us to see the similarities across humans or (b) the position that there are no universals and thus particulars have nothing in common besides how we label them. Neither of these is appealing to Jensen and thus he offers a middle ground of “conceptualism” (Jensen, 255). The idea of “conceptualism” is that universals are concepts, not real entities that

somehow exist ‘out there’, but that we can and should use them as they can be useful in our daily lives for communication and understanding.

Since Kant we have been told that we know not what things are “in themselves” thus, human universals concerning the knowledge about things are not in the things but in our classifications of them; they are in our categories and concepts, they are present *to us* only in our generalized terms and interpretations (Jensen, 249).

To Jensen, it makes no sense to ask whether funeral rites “really exist” or whether this ritual or that is “really” a funeral rite (Jensen, 260). In this way, it also beside the point to discuss the existence of universals, what matters is how we conceptualize them and then how the conceptualizations can help us make sense of our interpretations of the world.

William Paden: Human Behaviors

“Universals Revisited: Human Behaviors and Cultural Variations” by William Paden is another article concerned with the idea of universals. He considers the weaknesses of comparative methods to be (a), that the categories chosen for cross-cultural comparison are often impositions and (b), that any valid generalization must be so abstract that it is either obvious or becomes vacuous. The key problem that has existed in the past with comparison is that when comparison leads to universals, the universals themselves are cultural categories. When looking at the universality of cultural categories, he writes

Classical phenomenological comparativism, for its part, has bequeathed an enormous body of thematics, but a thematics tied to cultural categories, meanings and institutions. The points of comparability are religious topics—that is, classifications of kinds of religious belief and behavior. Not surprisingly, the patterns—like “deity” or “savior”—then become problematic when used as points of cross-cultural reference. They remain on the surface of culture, bound to their own folk origins and prototypes (Paden, 277).

Therefore, it is not with universals that the problem arises for Paden, but actually in the kind of universals posited. Cultural categories are always culturally constructed and therefore become very problematic when used as generalizations across cultures. In order to avoid such problematic use of universals, Paden wants to shift the direction of the universals posited away from culturally constructed categories and toward human behavior. To Paden, human behavioral universals eliminate any problematic assumptions that stem from cultural categories. He writes,

Still, the question does not go away: How to conceive of what recurs in human life, or in religious life? How can “difference” be found unless it is different with regard to something that is otherwise similar or shared? How to find secular, post-theological bases for comparative perspective in the wake of poststructuralist infatuation with diversity and conceptual reflexivity?....I will build upon the primary idea that we have regarded the comparativism problem too much from the point of view of cultural categories, and that we will do well to reconsider the uses of a broadened notion of human behaviors underlying and shared by all cultures (Paden, 276-7).

Though he knows that this will be difficult for postmodernists to accept, Paden notes that it will be “obvious” to natural scientists, who view humans “as a singular phylogenetic kind, with common genetic programming, social predispositions, and infrastructural cultural behaviors” (Paden, 277). When we use cultural categories to compare, each category is obviously bound to a culture, and one cannot escape one’s own culture when looking at another, and thus, generalizations based on such categories are very problematic. To Paden, this predicament disappears when looking at human behavior,

This approach involves identifying continuities in the kinds of things people do as humans—rather than patterns in the beliefs or “meanings” they project as religious insiders (Paden, 278).

To Paden, this idea works insofar as what humans share cross culturally is their genetic make-up; this genetic make-up causes humans to share common behaviors, but not necessarily share common meanings or beliefs, which are a resultant of culture.

Paden looks to alter the way universals are viewed and used. He writes:

While there are many ways to find patterns that underlie culture, here I focus on the broad idea that common to all sociocultural life is a wide network of universal kinds of behaviors and behavioral dispositions upon which or from which religious life builds its activities and worlds (Paden, 279).

After listing some types of universal behaviors Paden points out, that to him, when using these behaviors as cross-cultural comparison, the comparisons are not vacuous or intrusive. They are not vacuous as each type of behavior has a history and also not intrusive as it is only the behavior that is similar; the way these behaviors are done and the meaning assigned to them is where the difference becomes significant.

Identifying comparable forms of behavior is then a pivot point for finding and examining the differential variations, contrasts, and cultural workings and reworking of those common behaviors. In other words comparative religion focuses on *how* religious cultures construct pasts, defend identities, negotiate reciprocities, distinguish kin and non-kin, endow objects with prestige, mark significant times, discipline the mind, experiment with consciousness, engage linguistic objects as though they were entities, and map their universes... Thus comparative perspective here moves back and forth between the continuity of common functions and the contrastable differentials of historical specificity and types (Paden, 285).

Paden cites Saler's idea of natural resemblances, and wants to show that universals do not necessarily rule out the significance of particulars. For example, Quaker meetinghouses, Hopi kivas and Gothic cathedrals all use space differently, but all share the idea of "making sacred space" (Paden, 286). Paden says that, although this model directly addresses criticisms of universals, there are other models that begin with

particulars, “Thus one could set up comparison in either direction: similar function, different acts; *or* similar acts, different functions” (Paden, 288).

In Paden’s article, he also discusses how universals should not and cannot lie outside of history. One scholar who almost always is discussed in terms of historicizing (or the lack thereof) is Mircea Eliade. He is usually used as an example of someone who has erred in his attempt of comparing people and cultures outside of context and history. Paden wants to show how his new and improved technique for comparison leaves no room for this Eliadian style of context-lacking comparisons. He writes

Thus, comparative perspective here moves back and forth between the continuity of common functions and the contrastable differentials of historical specificity and context....Eliadian versions of sacred space, for example, are typically illustrative of commonality and sameness of motif. By contrast, a reformed comparativism does not limit the variations on the theme to just representing expressions of the theme but also studies them to learn from their sociocultural, contextual differences (Paden, 286).

Hugh Urban: Making a Place to Stand

In this section, through focusing on Hugh B. Urban’s article “Making a Place to Take a Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith and the Politics and Poetics of Comparison”, I want to explore the issue of the politics involved in comparing. In his article, Urban looks at and critiques Smith’s idea that by using comparison to study religion, scholars have no place to stand, that is, no point from which they can be centered. Smith sees comparison as something playful, to be done as an exercise that can possibly bring to light new aspects and draw out new sides of things, but not as anything overtly serious in nature.

For Smith, in short, comparison is best done in the “playful” modes of metaphor, irony and comedy—as a clever smile or a pun that helps us to see the world in new ways (Urban, 341).

To Urban, this is a dangerous and naïve point of view; he agrees with Talal Asad in that there are and have been serious implications of these seemingly uninterested scholarly works and how these works, in their Enlightenment origins, have been used in imperializing projects. Urban writes that what he finds troubling about Smith's work is the lack of responsibility he takes for the influence that scholarly work can have:

Second and more importantly, however, I will also suggest that a deeper, more troubling issue lies at the heart of Smith's work—namely the question of his own normative commitment or his “place on which to stand”. There is throughout Smith's oeuvre a troubling ambivalence regarding the role of the scholar's own personal interests and their effect on his work (Urban, 342).

Also, Urban contends that Smith's idea of the ‘stance-less position’ of a scholar, can and should be seen as problematic.

In contrast to Smith's “placeless comparison”, I will argue instead that the comparative study of religions should be—and in fact always already is—an *interested comparison*, one which is always rooted in the scholar's own political interests and normative commitments, and which is always in one way or another deployed in the service of those commitments (Urban, 343).

Urban argues that in partaking in the comparison of religion, we must take a stand, meaning that we must all

admit, articulate and defend our own personal positions in the world, while at the same time subjecting them to relentless self-reflection, criticism and the possibility of change (Urban, 343).

To Urban, the question that needs to be asked is whether or not the scholar can avoid taking a stand, whether anyone can remain detached and objective from her work and thus fully bracket out biases. When Smith says that there is no place for the historian of religions to stand, he is saying that not only do we not need to, but also that we cannot,

choose a place to stand. For Urban, if there is no place for the scholar to stand, then he doesn't see clearly any point of doing these comparisons (Urban, 360).

Urban sees part of taking a stand is for scholars to state clearly their goals and affiliations. Urban writes that a lot of his work is derived from Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, and thus by way of self-disclosure he explains, "Human beings, it seems to me, are fundamentally *interested* creatures, who are engaged in an ongoing struggle for both economic and symbolic resources within various conflicting social fields" (Urban, 371). The scholar needs to take a stand before anything can come from the comparisons.

The key to a genuinely useful scholarly comparison, therefore, would not simply lie in revealing some mysterious and striking similarity between two diverse, otherwise unconnected phenomena; nor would it even lie simply, in Smith's terms, in a playful, ironic metaphorical juxtaposition of phenomena, which delights in their incongruities and suggests new insights. Still more importantly, I would argue, such a comparison would also demand that we admit, render explicit and justify our own inescapable "place" in relation to our data, that we acknowledge and defend our own personal, political and normative stance (Urban, 372).

Situating Myself

After examining these articles and before attempting to write a comparative paper, I would like to try and situate myself in response to the questions in the introduction and what issues these scholars have raised. Now looking back at my dismissive attitude toward comparison, I can see that what was often the cause of me not taking comparative methods seriously was the idea that comparative projects always led to universals and generalizations. I thought the only type of comparative project would be an Eliadian or Joseph Campbell style, in which the aim is to show that what everyone is doing is

fundamentally the same. To me, when scholars attempt to situate projects outside of historical context to show ‘sameness’, they do not actually accomplish anything more than a ‘feel good’ movie, namely, they make you feel good for a while but then must come back to the context of your particular situation. In examining the articles above, I am now comforted by the idea that a comparative project can focus on differences and thus do not have to lead to some conclusion about how we are all really the ‘same’. I agree with Geertz in that what makes any particular situation interesting is how it differs from other particular situations. But in order to know about the differences, I appreciate Segal’s point that there must be a comparative starting point. Segal writes, “In short, the way to understand people X is not merely by myopically studying them more and more. It is also by studying other peoples as well” (Segal, 358). For if there are no similarities, if the situations have nothing in common, then the differences are mostly meaningless. Saler also makes this point with his natural resemblance theory. The importance of looking for natural resemblances and not universals is that resemblances not only allows for both similarity and difference, but also because they accent the broad spectrum of these similarities and differences. In this way comparison allows for appreciation of the diversity of the situations while also giving us a way to discuss the similarities without immediately leading to the conclusion of universality.

Therefore, I do not think it is accurate to characterize all comparative projects as necessarily focusing on the similarities. It is not the comparing per se that leads to generalizations, but rather the comparer’s motives. Through looking at the scholars above, it is clear that there are many different types of projects, each with its own starting point and intentions. Since, as I have stated above, I have no desire to partake in the

project of showing how everyone is the same, a comparative project for me would likely be focusing on the differences. In this way, I would want to start with the similarities; for example, in the ethnographic research I have been doing, what drew me to the women is that they are both about the same age and grew up in China during the Mao era and now consider themselves Christians. Although what drew me to the women in the first place were their similarities, I hope in the process of comparing them to be able to draw out their differences. I think that by finding differences, I will be able to highlight the complexities and uniqueness of their particular situations.

Another recurrent theme to emerge from the articles above in support of using comparative methods when studying religion is the value of looking at the way human cognition works and showing that, since we use comparison to locate and/or categorize everything we come across in our lives, scholars necessarily must use comparison when studying anything, including religion. Saler's main idea is that since we cannot and do not avoid using comparison when monitoring the world, we might as well realize the necessity of comparison in studying religion and then work on improving comparative methods. He writes,

Schema theory and other facets of the cognitive sciences remind us that certain of the intellectual processes of the human brain are crucially comparative. In that comparison is ineluctable in monitoring the world and in coming to understand newly encountered events, then perhaps we can consciously improve on what is cognitively inevitable (Saler, 267).

Saler sees the attempt of postmodernists to avoid the general in favor of the particular as an impossible task: "For the general is intimately associated with the comparative and the comparative cannot be eschewed" (Saler, 268). Segal echoes these sentiments when he writes,

Sixth and most important, comparison is not merely permissible but indispensable. To understand any phenomenon, however specific, is to identify it and to account for it. To identify something is to place it in a category, and to account for it is to account for the category of which it is a member. Both procedures are thus inescapably comparativist (Segal, 352).

I am not yet convinced of this idea that, since we use comparison to make sense of the world, then we must use comparison in scholarly writing about the world. I agree that humans use comparison constantly in monitoring the world, and thus while doing fieldwork I don't think anyone would argue that there isn't a constant comparing of what you are experiencing for the first time with what you are accustomed; but, at the same time, the comparisons we use to make sense of the world are not set, not structured comparisons. When I am making sense of the world, the comparisons I make are constantly shifting, constantly being rearranged and being used at different levels. Rarely, if ever, would I only be comparing two things or two women like the structure of the comparative paper I will write in the next section. Thus I would argue that the comparisons happening at the level of bringing new experiences into the realm of those experiences we have already had and understand are very different than structuring a paper comparatively. Therefore, by saying that we should use comparative methods in scholarship because we use comparison in our everyday monitoring of the world, doesn't convince me of the inevitability of comparative methods.

In response to Hugh Urban's criticisms of Smith and Smith's notion of comparison as play, I am still unsure where to situate myself. I agree with Smith's idea that comparisons are to be used as a tool to shift through information, not necessarily to find or produce truth statements. Although, as Urban could potentially point out, just because scholars agree to not accept the generalizations that come from comparisons as

truth statements, does not at all mean others will do the same. It is with regards to the idea of politics in scholarly work that I am still unsure as to the whereabouts of my position. In one moment I find myself on very parallel ground with Smith, that we need not take ourselves too seriously, and a great way to make sure we don't take ourselves too seriously is by treating comparison and our scholarly work as a playful exercise, meant only to enable to us to revisit and look upon things from new perspectives and with new insight. But in looking at what Asad, Urban and countless other scholars have written, I can't help but feel somewhat sympathetic to the notion that by treating our work as nonpolitical we are not being nonpolitical, we are just potentially turning a blind eye to the effects our work has and how these projects "have been inevitably intertwined with the forces of political, cultural and economic colonialism" (Urban, 369). For, even if in my work I do not take myself seriously, do not pretend to have any motive other than to compare playfully, I still have no control over whom could potentially take it seriously and then act accordingly. Urban writes, "if the academic study of religion can be construed as a form of 'play', then it is surely a very serious, often dangerous form of *deep play*" (Urban, 369). Hopefully, after writing the following comparative essays, I will be able to situate myself within this debate about the seriousness of comparative scholarship.

Looking ahead to the next part of the thesis, a question that arises is how to go about *doing* a comparative paper. In Jonathan Z. Smith's "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" he explores just this topic. He begins by quoting the Stranger from Elea in that "A cautious man should above all be on his guard against resemblances; they are a very slippery sort of thing" (Smith, 29). Smith's article points out how limited the options are

for comparative methodology. After outlining the four basic styles of comparison, ethnographic, encyclopaedic, morphological, and evolutionary, Smith first takes us through why each style or method is inadequate and then writes, “The only option appears to be no option at all” (Smith, 29). To Smith this is an embarrassment as historians of religion have “yet to develop the responsible alternative: the integration of a complex notion of pattern and system with an equally complex notion of history” (Smith, 34). Smith is haunted by this Wittgenstein quote:

But isn't the same at least the same? We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself...Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things? (Smith, 40).

He concludes his article with the somber notion that what we have now as comparative methods do not offer any promising results. Unfortunately, he does not make any suggestions as to how to improve comparison, but just finishes with an unsatisfied need for the improvement.

I agree with Smith in that there has not been any precedent set for how to do comparison. But, I am disappointed, that although Smith convincingly points out the lacking in good models to use, he nevertheless does not offer any suggestions or new ideas on methodology. Hugh Urban, also unsatisfied with Smith, writes,

While he has persuasively deconstructed virtually all past models, he has not yet given us any kind of well-developed new method of comparison to take their place...Smith has never systematically worked out a coherent method for comparison or a rigorous means of evaluating its results (Urban, 341).

Unfortunately for the student of comparative methods, it appears we are left without much guidance as to how to go about our projects.

One question that the academic literature does not really address is whether or not comparison is methodologically oriented, meaning does one's method (i.e. fieldwork or textual analysis) dictate the utility of comparison? Is there any correlation between doing fieldwork versus doing text-based work and skepticism toward comparison? Hopefully at the end of writing a comparative paper, I will be able to personally assess these questions.

Part II.

Doing Comparison

Upon researching and writing the first part of the thesis, I was able to acquire a lot of knowledge on both sides of the arguments about the utility of comparison. Not only do I understand different scholars' ideas about comparative projects, I have also had the opportunity to explore where I think I stand on some of the issues. Now that I have a basic knowledge of what other scholars are discussing in relation to comparison, and recognize my personal stance, my goal is to after actually doing a comparative work, again be self reflexive as to my views on comparative methods.

The original plan for this part of my thesis was to do an ethnographic fieldwork project with two Chinese women, of whom both currently reside in Columbus, Ohio. I encountered some difficulties in doing the ethnographic fieldwork and ultimately had to alter the structure of this second part. As the comparative paper relied heavily on my ethnographic work, when I ran into problems scheduling time to meet with the women, the progress was disappointingly slow. The hindrances I encountered seem to have to do with the involvedness of fieldwork, namely, I am not sure that one can do fieldwork successfully if it does not have all of your attention. Therefore, the frequency and number of visits I had with each of the women was not adequate to feel comfortable writing about them. My research hinged on a relatively few meetings with the women, which I came to realize was very problematic. Also, when some of the meetings fell through, the impact on my data was fairly dramatic. When I should have already begun the comparative writing part of the thesis, I still felt I had very little information about the women, and thus wasn't really able to move forward.

As the entire reason for the thesis began with my desire to work with comparative methods and draw my own conclusions about their utility by writing a comparative paper, I was not willing to give up on writing my own comparative piece. Therefore, I decided to move forward with attempting to compare the women from the ethnographic work, but also added two new parts to the comparative half of this thesis: (a) a text-based comparison and (b) a comparison of the ethnographic comparison and the text-based comparison. Besides allowing for me to continue with the *doing* of a comparative paper, by adding these parts I will also be able to explore more thoroughly the question of whether the methodology of fieldwork and textual analysis influences the effectiveness and appropriateness of comparison.

Ethnographic-based Comparison

Before I begin to compare the two women with whom I talked and had e-mail correspondence, I would like to emphasize that I proceed cautiously. I do not intend to give the impression that I have adequate information or understanding of the women to write conclusively about them. Nonetheless, based on what I do know and the correspondences we have had, I am going to try and do comparison. The goal is not to come to some concretized notion of who these women are or what role religion has played in their lives, but more that through comparing their lives examine if we are left with something more, some deeper understanding than if I had just written about one of them particularly.

Beginning first with these women's backgrounds, I will try to explore and compare (a) the history of how they became involved with Christianity, (b) problems that arose from their involvement in Christianity, and (c) how their involvement and beliefs in

Christianity have changed their lives. The hope is that through the comparison, the similarities and differences of these women will lead us to a measure of “reciprocal illumination”, a term Arvind Sharma uses to express the ability of comparison to illuminate otherwise unseen or unnoticed aspects of each component of the comparison. What drew me to these two women were their similarities; they both grew up in Post-Maoist China and currently both consider themselves Christians. From this starting point of similarity, I would like to compare and contrast their lives to see what differences emerge.

‘Religion’ while growing up

The two women with whom I have been talking, Wei and Xiao, both grew up in China in the Post-Mao era. The women experienced similar first contact with the ideas of religion; they both remember learning and thinking that religion was both destructive and entirely for the weak. When speaking about her family, Xiao said, “We grew up being educated that there is no god, we should not be controlled by anything other than ourselves, and we should be the owner of our own lives”. When I asked Wei about what she knew about religion while growing up in China, she said:

It is not easy for the Chinese to accept religion and have patience to listen to religious talking. Because the Chinese government does not encourage religious activity, we believe that religion is connected to superstitious thoughts. In China, we think the theory of religion makes people believe something that does not exist. It [religion] is bad because it makes so many people act so "foolish". The Communist party government makes us believe in ourselves or believe in the party, if we believe in god, it's like we admit that we are incomplete, we are weak, we are foolish, we are different people, and we don't want other people to think we are like that.

She added that it is often through the use of media in China that religion is seen as having a negative effect on people, and usually the people who are religious are portrayed by the media as having little or no education. She said,

Religion is thought to be connected to superstitious activity because the media often says in some areas of China, people believe in "god", they don't go to the hospital when they get sick, they don't believe in science; they ask for rain, ask for help with the future by going to temples. So to us religion is connected to non-education. When I was in China, I knew that there are many underground churches in the countryside, so I believed only non-educated people believe in religion so easily (because most of people in countryside don't have chance to be educated).

We can see that, for both women, their earliest encounters with the idea of religion was that it was only for people who were not strong enough to survive the world on their own or for people who did not know better than to believe in superstitious ideas. It is interesting to note how growing up in Communist China, these women's experiences directly reflect the Marxist ideology of the time. Karl Marx wrote, "Religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself" (Marx, 41). These women were taught that they should be trusting in the Communist Party and themselves, certainly not god or any religion. As a result of their early contact with the notion of religion, neither woman ever really had any interest in any religion until they left China, Xiao for Korea and Wei for the United States.

Motives and Circumstances of becoming 'Christian'

Xiao said she actually never even thought about religion or god until she was about 22 years old and went to study in Korea. The University in which she was enrolled was a Christian school founded by an American missionary. At the time, she was not being funded by any scholarships and thus having to pay for everything herself left her

with very little money. She recalls attending meetings for a Christian group because she was so poor and “was always hungry”. The Christian Bible study provided a free meal for the attendees. Before eating, everyone would pray. During prayer time, at first Xiao wasn’t too interested in what was going on, she was mostly there for the food. But one day she recalled saying to God, “Well if you can make all these other people believe in you, let’s see if you can make me”. To Xiao, it was more in jest that she was saying this than that she really thought there was a god or that anything would come of it. The next day a woman approached her and asked if she wanted to study the Bible together. Xiao was caught off guard and looking back she is certain that this was God’s way of reaching out to her; one day she was praying to God asking him to help her believe and the next day something happened to her that opened her up to becoming a Christian. She says she was very intrigued with the Bible as “she couldn’t believe that there was one book so many people were interested in”. It was through the Bible study with that woman that Xiao eventually became interested enough in Christianity to be baptized.

What initially attracted Wei to a church seems to be very similar to Xiao’s situation, namely she was having problems in her life and she thought that going to church could potentially help. Wei was having a difficult time being a study abroad student and she felt like she needed support. Although she was introduced to Christianity in China through a relative who lived in Taiwan, she never considered becoming a Christian until she moved to the United States. She said,

After I came to the United States, I went through a lot of difficulties in my personal life, in my studies and in finding jobs. Three years ago when I was in deep depression, I got through it by exercising every night after school. I told myself that I didn’t need any religion to help me. I did not rely on alcohol or drugs, or a psychiatrist at all. But you know, as an international student, we go through many tough moments, such as

financial problems, visa status, discrimination (true or false), language barrier, so that even a tiny little thing can destroy our faith in life. I often have thoughts about how I can handle those difficulties by myself everyday, I thought I was helpless. I started to go to church last June, trying to make some friends. I went to church one Sunday and happened to find my pastor's relative's name on the bulletin and that he was going to host a seminar in Cedarville (Chinese Christian group's summer meeting). I spent a whole three days at Cedarville College, attended as many seminars as I could, and I felt that I wanted to be part of it. It's like someone pushed me to make that decision. I decided to be baptized in November.

We can see that, for both Xiao and Wei, their original motivations for attending meetings or church had very little to do with any 'religious' desires and much more to do with the how the meetings could help them meet secular needs. Xiao was hungry, Wei wanted to find friends. We should note that what caused both women to be attracted to these gathering is in line with the Durkheimian idea of religion being functional, in that it is less about being connected to some divine being and more about helping people function in the world.

Interestingly, for both women, upon attending and becoming familiar with the church and Bible studies, they both moved toward desiring something more than fulfilling their original needs. For Wei, although what originally drew her to the church in the beginning was the desire to find friends, it seems in the end what kept her going back had very little to do with the friends she made. In fact, when discussing with me her experiences with her church, she rarely talked about how the people she met became her friends. When she discussed with me the people in her Bible study, she mentioned one woman who actually made her quit attending her group for a while due to a disagreement they had. But even when Wei was no longer a part of the group (she is now back

attending on a weekly basis) she was not at all discouraged about her identity as a Christian and her desire to “continue to pray and be connected with god”.

Consequences of Becoming Christian

After discussing with me growing up in China and how they became Christians, both women told me how becoming a Christian had changed their lives. Xiao said that before she became a Christian, she doubted everything, as to her the world was constantly changing. She thought that “nothing was deserving of her effort, as one day it could be true and then the next could be proven wrong”. She couldn’t really bring herself to put all her energy into anything as she didn’t trust that what she was putting so much effort into was worthwhile. But upon reading the Bible and becoming a Christian, she said “I feel like I found the absolute truth” and “a personal savior”. She said that her view of life and the world has changed; she is very happy now and has a grateful heart. She said she does not feel she deserves what God has given her. “I am always happy now, nothing will be a real problem anymore” as God can both help her and support her.

Happiness is also something Wei discussed feeling after converting to Christianity. She said,

After the Cedarville trip, I found myself changed gradually. I became more positive. (I used to be a very negative person my whole life). I now have positive views on many things and I have more faith in myself and in others. At the same time, someone I only talked to twice during the Cedarville trip invited me to church, to join their group, and I thought it was also a sign that I need to do it. Not long after baptism, my [work] position became a full-time position after 8 months of part-time. I felt that it was "love" that made me change, to make me feel joyful in life, and make other people change their view about me. I felt that if I knew God earlier, the ups and downs in my life wouldn’t have hurt me so much. I am now capable of handling it much better than before.

Later she said

Being a Christian I stopped being jealous. I think jealousy is normal for human beings. I feel a lot less jealousy now because it hurts. As I realize it is a sin and it hurts, I start to wish other people doing good, this make myself feel good too. Why should I be jealous, I ask myself, no matter how hard I try, I still can not get what I want. It hurts because it reminds me every time that I am not as good as others. But this is not true. God created us for a reason. We ARE different. I should enjoy what I have and who I am. I became positive about myself. I try to avoid negative things that affect my mood, I really do. So I became happier, and do not worry about how people judge me, do not worry about what job I am doing, how much I earn, because I am who I am, I have tried my best.

Besides these positive aspects that their new role as Christians played in their lives, both women also found new obstacles. In looking at their responses to these obstacles, I think we can see some differences in their thinking emerge. At the time Xiao became a Christian, she was dating a man who is now her husband. He was not interested in religion and this became a serious problem for them in their relationship. When Xiao told her husband that God could support them he said “you shouldn’t trust God, you should trust me”. She told me “I could not bear that the one I love would go to hell” so she kept pushing for him to explore it more. Eventually, her husband realized if he didn’t try, they would not have a future together, so he began going to church with Xiao. Although they are now attending a church together, he is still not too interested in becoming a Christian. Xiao seemed comforted by his effort.

Through Xiao’s explanation of why she wanted her husband to become a Christian, we can see that she views Christianity as the only way for one to go to heaven, and all others will to go to hell. Even someone who Xiao loves deeply and knows is a good person will not have a chance to go to heaven unless he attends church. But for

Wei, the idea that there is only one ‘right’ religion makes her uncomfortable. She said “I do not object to other religions. I understand other people's needs, just like mine. This is the difference between other people in the fellowship, some of them object to other religions violently”. Wei, unlike Xiao does not feel as if there is just one religion, one right way to view the world. She never talked about finding an absolute truth like Xiao did, it seemed she was more comfortable talking about the positive aspects for her individually in becoming a Christian.

Also for Wei, unlike Xiao, the Bible did not play a large role in her understanding of Christianity. She said,

About Christianity, I have not read the bible very much. I know our God is the God of love and joy. We should get together to worship God. We should pray hard, prayer is very effective. We should always have faith in God and God knows everything. I just simply follow these and they make my life simple and joyful. Since this is the relationship between God and me, I do not need to worry about what other people think of me. For me, Christianity is as simple as love and sharing.

For Xiao, it was learning about the Bible and studying the Bible that finally brought her to want to become a Christian. She “felt overwhelmed by the wisdom of God’s word” and through reading the Bible, “felt her heart was set free”.

I asked both women how their friends and family reacted back in China when they told them they were Christians. Xiao said her mom, who is usually very gentle became extremely angry with her and actually shouted. But then “after they saw how it had changed me, they were very happy for me”. Originally Xiao thought there were very few Christians in China but upon returning, she realized that there are actually a lot of Christians living in China but that they are under persecution by the Chinese government and thus are more underground about their beliefs.

Wei recalls that after she became a Christian, when telling people back home that she was a Christian, she received numerous different responses including "are you sure?", "enjoy whatever you've got, because life is so short", and one of her friends said "so you belong one organization now?" as though it is similar to joining the Communist party. One of her friends asked "do you really feel comfortable doing it?" insinuating that to them it appeared like people in the church had pushed her to that decision. Wei also discussed how often times in China, if people do not agree with what you are doing, they will just keep silent about it, but she could tell some people were thinking "that poor woman finally had to rely on religion" or "she is in something that she cannot get out of". Wei said she knew people were having these thoughts because when she was living in China if the same situation had occurred, she would be thinking the same things as well.

Although there are people in China who might regard Wei as weak, she is content with her life and her choice to become a Christian.

I am happy to tell people that I AM WEAK. I feel fine with it because I started thinking like a Christian. Gradually I unloaded my burdens, let God lead my life, I believe God will show me the right things to do. I enjoy my life now instead of worrying about the future. I understand many things in life are out of my control, so I'd rather not worry about it. If there is not God to lead me, I might end up like a crazy woman with no hopes, no friends.

Xiao places similar emphasis on allowing God to lead her through life. When I asked her if she was planning on staying in the United States or returning to China, she said she would be happy staying in the US but "if I am called to go back to China then I wouldn't mind". We can see from her language that she doesn't feel it will be a decision that she makes, what God leads her to do, she is happy to oblige.

The complexity of ethnography

I am very grateful to these women for the opportunity to talk with them. But unfortunately, I feel I have only just begun to amass information. All the above work is based solely on what they said; I was never able to attend church or Bible study with them, and thus was never able to be the participant observer that is so important in fieldwork. Because of my limited research, there are aspects of this comparative paper that are problematic. One of these problems is in the use of the term 'Christian' and 'Christianity'. Both Wei and Xiao belong to foreign churches, Xiao attends a predominantly Korean church and Wei a predominantly Chinese church. For both women, what 'kind' of Christianity they are involved in was never an important part of their stories. And being that I never attended church with either woman, I still do not know with whom their churches have affiliations. Therefore, throughout this essay, when using the terms 'Christian' and 'Christianity', I knew it was problematic to do so in such an ambiguous way, but due to my limited knowledge, I was unable to correct the situation.

This brings me to what I would argue is the most important aspect of ethnographic fieldwork, the time commitment to the research. Most anthropological ethnographies require at least a year of fieldwork. I now understand why. People are very complex and their situations are usually just as or even more complex. In order to have adequate information to write about people and their situations, much time is needed. For this undergraduate thesis, because I am currently in graduate school, the time I spent researching was not sufficient. Fieldwork is not something that can or should be a side project and unfortunately in my situation it became just that type of project. In this respect, I am not satisfied with the product. I am left wondering what

other information would have been important to my thesis and if I had had the opportunity to attend church or Bible study with them, would I have observed something that would allow for more insight into what they said? I am also curious if having more information on the women would have made it easier or more difficult to compare them.

The Utility of Differences in Comparison

While I was talking and e-mailing with these women, I must admit that I began to have a sense of dread about having them be the topics of my comparative paper. I realized, similar to what I wrote in the first part of this thesis, that a large part of my suspicion and hesitancy toward comparison is similar to Geertz in the dislike and distrust of focusing on similarities. As Segal phrases the problem, “[T]he notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share” (Segal, 343).

Subscribing to this Geertzian way of thinking, I view humans as not only having differences, but significant differences as well. I did not want to contribute to comparing people for the purpose of universalizing. I originally thought that as I compared these women, they would both become concretized in a completely inaccurate way. I thought this would occur just because I was taking what they said and writing it down comparatively. I did not want these women’s experiences or my portrayal of these women’s experiences to be seen as some conclusive statement or as being capable to speak for a broader field of people.

But what I found was when I began the writing was that the comparative structure allowed me to highlight the differences of the women and thus I was able to reveal the

complexity of their situations. In comparing what the women said, I was able to see them in relation and perhaps understand them differently than if I had just focused on one woman. Often what would happen when talking with one of the women was that our topic of conversation would later help stimulate questions that I could ask the other. For example, I am not sure if I would have asked Xiao what her family and friends said about her Christianity if Wei had not brought up how her friends reacted. In this way, I really view the comparison as aiding the exploration of the women much more so than I originally would have thought. I am still unclear if the comparative structure was helpful because I was not able to amass adequate information about the women and thus needed a comparative framework to give me something *to do*.

Text-based Comparison

For the textual based comparison I wanted to continue with the theme of women who grew up in China during the Mao era. For this comparison, the main focus will be on two autobiographical texts written by women about their experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution. Naihua Zhang and Xiaomei Chen are two women who grew up in urban China during the Mao era and who both currently reside in the United States. Naihua Zhang is an assistant professor at Florida Atlantic University, her research interests are contemporary women's movements and women's organizations in China. Xiaomei Chen, at the time this book was published was an associate professor at the Ohio State University in the Department of Comparative Studies.

The texts I will be comparing are the memoirs these women contributed to *Some of Us, Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era*, edited by Xueping Zhong, Wang

Zheng, and Bai Di. The women who contributed to the book see their memoirs as important contributions to a broader understanding of the Mao era,

We want to explore the necessarily more complex dimensions of issues raised and debated in recent scholarship on how to assess and understand twentieth-century China and, especially, the Mao era...Through exploring the various intersections between “official ideology” and “lived experience”, we want our stories not only to “enrich and complicate” the existing understanding of that era but also to open further discussion of the Mao era and, by extension, its relationship to China’s century-long quest for modernity (Zhong, xvii).

Because Zhang and Chen both grew up during the Mao era, both agree that the memoirs depicting that time period in China, especially for women during the Cultural Revolution, are limited in scope, these women’s memoirs make a great comparative case study.

In a World Together Yet Apart

Naihua Zhang, in her essay “In a World Together Yet Apart, Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies”, focuses a lot on her relationships with two women she met while working in a small village in northeast China. Her experience during the Cultural Revolution seems different from the other memoirs I have read in that she really seemed to enjoy her years working in the field. She begins her story in 1966 when she was a popular student at an all-girls elite middle school in Beijing. When it was discovered that her father held a position considered capitalistic, her status quickly fell and she severely felt the discrimination of her peers. Zhang’s harshest memory of this discrimination came when, although she was selected by her classmates to participate in the 1968 National Day in Tiananmen Square, she was denied by the school’s committee based on her father’s background. Her feelings toward her classmates and

peers were filled with sadness and the realization that perhaps no one would ever trust her again. She explains:

It was with this deeply buried sense of doubt and hopelessness about my future that I left Beijing on March 22, 1969, boarding a train with four classmates to begin our long journey to a remote village in the Manchura township of Momoge in Zhanlai County, Jilin Province, in northeast China. I was seventeen years old (Zhang, 5).

Life on the farm was hard for Zhang but it did not take her long to adjust, especially to the villagers' hospitality. Zhang recalls that it was refreshing to be judged by her skills on the farm and not by her father's occupation:

This incident made me realize that the villagers did not really care what my family class origin was when evaluating my work, nor were their views easily swept by the quickly changing political winds (Zhang, 7).

It was this sort of non-political treatment from the villagers that allowed Zhang to begin to heal from the discrimination she experienced in Beijing. Zhang, unlike many others, feels thankful for how the people in the village treated her and made her feel welcome:

In some memoirs or literary works, zhiqing are portrayed as victims of corrupt local officials, and the period in the countryside is seen as a waste of time in their lives. I have always felt a deep sense of gratitude and nostalgia toward the people in my village, a place I devoted a full eight years of my youth and from which I have also gained much in return (Zhang, 7).

For Zhang, the most important aspect of the time she spent in the countryside was the relationships she built with two women from the countryside, Guirong and Lifeng. These two women not only showered Zhang with affection and generosity but also through their close relationship allowed Zhang to recall this period in her life as being happy: "Yes, we encountered many difficulties and endured hardships, but, all in all, we

were happy” (Zhang, 13). Zhang recalls their attitudes of the time as being ready for any challenge and extremely enthusiastic about the opportunity to help explore new farming techniques to help the countryside residents of China: “I was a true believer in scientific farming as the way to improve productivity and the standard of living for peasants and felt that I could contribute to this end” (Zhang, 19). Also in contrast to other memoirs, where this time period is seen as a waste of time and energy, Zhang credits her ability to have such a great experience in the countryside to the special time period created by the Cultural Revolution: “The specific time and circumstances under which we lived provided opportunities for us to engage in a variety of activities and made our experience fulfilling, enriching, and empowering” (Zhang, 13).

Throughout her time at the farm, Zhang was conscious about the differences of her being a zhiqing (educated youth from an urban context) and her farmer friends, but it was not until she began preparations to leave the countryside that the full force of these differences became reality. In her story, she is very clear about the fact that being a zhiqing from the city allowed her many privileges; at first she only saw these in terms of benefits she received from being in the countryside, but as the Cultural Revolution died down, she realized that her ability to move about and to get a job to support herself back in the city was completely different then what the future held for her best friends.

Besides the special relationships Zhang made during her time in the countryside, she also writes about what it meant to be a girl during that period (i.e. both a child and a female). Looking back and thinking about that question, she realized “that unlike family class origin or zhiqing, gender was an aspect that I was quite unconscious of in my youth” (Zhang, 14). A very famous quote from Mao Zedong at the time was: “Time has

changed. Men and women are the same. Whatever men can do, women can do too” (Zhang,15). It was this kind of thinking that appears to have made Zhang and some of the other authors in this book forget about gender during their time in the countryside. In school and at home, Zhang was never made to feel different from or inferior to boys. What was stressed and important, she writes, was how good of a student one was, not their gender.

Zhang was elected to leadership positions all throughout school, and recalls that it was not uncommon for girls to hold these positions. It was not until she became the target of class discrimination that her leadership roles were taken from her. Again, the discrimination was due to political reasons, not ones related to her gender. Then later, when she was working on the farm, she also held numerous leadership roles and she and her two friends often did the most strenuous work, which had before always been seen as men’s work. Besides never feeling held back by her gender, Zhang sees Mao’s saying on equality as having a large impact on her gender identity and how she viewed femininity: “I was actually quite “ignorant” about my body and the traditional sense of femininity” (Zhang, 15-16). It was not until after the Cultural Revolution when she overheard a woman complaining about how the countryside had ruined her shape that Zhang realized the concept of “shape” existed. Interestingly, Zhang writes about how during that time, she did not have any sense of “women as a category” (Zhang, 16) as she does now. The housewives that she got to know in her village had many sufferings, but Zhang always felt that they were class sufferings and never felt connected to these women through being a woman:

I viewed their sufferings as all rooted in the economic backwardness of the countryside, which I thought I was helping to eradicate

through my work at the experimental farm. It never occurred to me that they and I were all connected as women (Zhang, 16).

Another aspect of gender that Zhang recalls from living in China's northeast during the Cultural Revolution was that the big distinction between a girl and a woman. This transformation took place when a girl married, and her status seemed to drop immediately. An unmarried girl had a certain status in her own household, but as soon as she married she became part of her husband's family, and usually had the lowest status in that family. Zhang uses a Chinese saying to illustrate this point "it would be the end of it if a girl marries" (*nude yi jiehun jiu wanle*) (Zhang, 17). Not only did the woman's status change, but she was usually given the most amounts of work as well as the toughest jobs around her new household. After marriage, she was only referred to as "so and so's wife", her own name no longer of any importance.

Zhang writes about how her countryside friends desperately wanted to have her freedom of being from an urban setting and being able to hold a paying job instead of being dependent upon marriage for success. But during Zhang's time at the farm, she stresses that none of them were thinking about such things as marriage, "it seemed to be too early and embarrassing to even think about such personal matters as marriage and dating" (Zhang, 18).

The first time Zhang felt any gender discrimination herself was in the mid 1980s after the Cultural Revolution was well over. The discrimination had to do with marriage. Without even knowing it, Zhang had become part of a "social problem" in China. Hu Yaobang, the Communist Part Secretary at the time identified the problem that a lot of men and women who had lived through the Cultural Revolution were still single in their late twenties and early thirties, and asked organizations to help match them together. At

this time, the image of an ideal woman changed, often leaving those who excelled during the Cultural Revolution without an adequate match. The men seemed to be looking for younger women who were less educated and thus not a threat to them or their intelligence, whereas the women wanted an equal match. Zhang recalls often being asked by her friends and family if she had solved her personal problem (geren wenti), meaning it was problematic for her not to be married.

The last thing Zhang addresses in her story is the great division between people from the city and people who lived in the countryside. Not just their location and living conditions differed, but also their opportunities. For Zhang, being a zhiqing enhanced her ability to move about and to attain employment for herself, whereas Guirong and Lifeng, due to relocating laws, were unable to move anywhere and thus unable to provide themselves new and better opportunities.

From “Lighthouse” to Northeast Wilderness

In Xiaomei Chen’s essay, “From “Lighthouse” to the Northeast Wilderness”, she begins her story when she is in the United States. She stresses how living abroad not only gave her new experiences and new opportunities but it also allowed her to reflect upon and to see her experiences growing up in the Mao era through new perspectives:

To recover an affirmative experience in China, therefore, is not to dismiss an equally positive experience of living outside China, where global perspectives provided me with a unique way of valuing my own culture, no matter how negatively it had been portrayed in scholarly works and the popular media (Chen, 55).

She talks about how she struggled with other memoirs written by women who grew up in the Mao era, for example *Wild Swans*, and how when she was a professor and teaching the book at the Ohio State University she often felt as if she was becoming part

of the China bashing that had become commonplace in the West. To counterbalance all the negativity, she began to recount the positive aspects of growing up in China to her students, trying to allow for both multiple perspectives of the Cultural Revolution and also to portray the happy memories she had of her childhood. She writes about how in teaching her students these different points of view she often felt that the critical perspective she was attempting to portray got lost in either her emotions or in the striving to keep the attention of college freshmen. Therefore, the point of this essay for Chen is to try and find an honest and balanced perspective:

Thus, my goal, in this brief memoir and elsewhere, is to arrive at a balanced perspective that can honestly reflect my native experience and, in so doing, both affirm and interrogate that experience” (Chen, 56-7).

What is interesting about Xiaomei Chen is that she chooses to focus on very different aspects of the time period. She writes,

While I had many of the same experiences recollected in this anthology, such as that of being a qingnian (youth), funu (woman), and a zhiqing (educated youths living in rural China, full of the spirit of wusi [selflessness]), I want to focus on my experience as the daughter of two luminaries of the theater, who at times filled me with pride and other times mortified me, depending on where I was and the circumstances (Chen, 56).

Chen’s working through the dichotomy of celebrity and commoner is a clear theme throughout her memoir. She says that she could feel comfortable in both positions, playing the role of having an elite background as well as identifying with the ‘common’ people: “These dual identities often provided me with a sense of security that allowed me to function at my best” (Chen, 57).

Because Chen focuses on her parents’ careers and how their status affected her growing up, much of her memoir takes place around performances, both her parents’

performances as well as the role performance played in shaping her experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the text, Chen makes many references to how her parents influenced her greatly in both positive and negative ways; from being ashamed of how they dressed, to wanting to be like them and being captivated by the stories they told upon returning from performing around China, all these interactions with her parents left her with strong impressions:

The Maoist rhetoric that privileged the common people (for example, workers, peasants, and soldiers) ensured that any sense of elitist glory such as had once been planted in me as a child would be uprooted because of the contemporary insistence that an acting career was no more glorious than any other occupation (Chen, 59).

Chen's parents were very active in promoting the socialist ideals of equality among the classes. They toured factories, mines, and rural China to not only give performances but also to teach the local people how to create and put on their own dramas:

My parents' passionate belief in ordinary people, and their sincere efforts to reform themselves into revolutionary artists, deserving of the working class's trust, remain among my most prized impressions from the time I spent with them at the dinner table (Chen, 60).

Chen writes that her feeling of having multiple identities (both common and elite) not only came from her parents' employment and social status but also from when she was eleven years old. At that time she wrote an essay that was published in a very popular newspaper. The essay, entitled "Lighthouse", described how the lights of the Forbidden City, across the lake from the bus she rode home everyday, would sparkle at night and she imagined Chairman Mao writing by these lights his next brilliant plans for the Chinese people. She wrote how she thought it was by these guiding lights that

millions of Chinese were doing miraculous work in the name of China all across the country. The essay was an instant hit. When she became famous after the publication, her peers turned against her and accused her of cheating, thus somewhat isolating her from her classmates. She notes that this did not have too much of an effect on her as,

Growing up in Maoist China, I had been taught to admit my own vulnerabilities and weaknesses by being open and receptive to the criticisms of others. Both at home and at school, I had been taught the value of sincerity and humility (Chen, 64).

Thus, once again we can see the idea that, for Chen, even when one stands out from their peers they still have their own weaknesses, and for the sake of keeping everyone at the same level, these weaknesses should be pointed out. Besides learning humility and the need for self and peer criticism, Chen also writes about the need to “trust the masses”. In order to be a good leader, Chen thinks that one cannot be seen as anything different or above those they are leading. What we can see at work again in these situations is the duality and tension of being the same as those around you while at the same time, standing out from crowd as a special individual.

Chen, when writing about her childhood, says, “I can honestly say I had a happy, even an exhilarating childhood, although I was not spared some growing pains” (Chen, 57). Chen’s happy times included dancing as a part of her school’s welcoming team. She then describes how heartbreaking it was to be taken off the list once the Cultural Revolution started and her father’s past was investigated. Besides being kicked off the dance team, Chen was also denied multiple times for membership in the propaganda team formed to spread Mao Zedong thought. Nonetheless, she had such an appetite for performing and actively contributing to the politics of the times that she went home and with other children in her neighborhood, children whose parents were also being

investigated, formed their own performing group. The group worked really hard, sometimes staying up all night to prepare a new performance elaborating on a new quote by Chairman Mao. She spent so much time practicing and performing with the group that it became central to her childhood and her childhood dreams:

I view my xuanchuandui days today as one of the most exciting times of my adolescence, when fun and duty intertwined so well as to render perfectly natural my role of little player in the larger scheme of political theater (Chen, 68).

In 1968, Chen's life changed drastically with another new saying from Mao, this one revolving around youths from the city going to the countryside to become "re-educated by the peasants". Although Chen was one year younger than the minimum age requirement, she insisted upon going, thinking it was a great opportunity for her group to perform in a new part of China. "I was ready to join my teammates in the Beijing train station and looked forward to our going together to the wilderness to spread our performing tradition" (Chen, 70). But shortly after the train pulled out of the station, Chen realized that her troupe no longer existed; she was told they were no longer children together in a troupe, but instead, now adults waiting to be told their assignments in the field. She continued to hold onto to the idea that when they reached their destination they could be reunited, but she was dropped off was hundreds of miles from any of her group members; she writes, "I was devastated" (Chen, 71). The team, which had been central to Chen's identity, did not survive the move to the countryside. "Until then, my team, which defined my very existence, had seemed more important to me than my family" (Chen, 71). Her desire to perform did not end with the break up of her troupe, and she writes that she spent much time in the fields dreaming about the opportunity to perform again.

For Chen, life on the countryside consisted of working both on the farm and in the dining hall, where she was able to put to use her writing skills by evaluating her peers' accomplishments. Eventually, her ability to write led to her spending her final two years at the farm reporting. She would travel around and report about different people and their experiences, thus still maintaining a fluid identity, living among many different types of people but still using her own writing skills to write the stories. She also tells about her experience of playing the morning crow in some village plays, and performing the sound so well that she actually achieved a bit of celebrity status due to it. She recalls that being able to perform such a minor part and still be recognized for her ability fulfilled a lot of her needs for performing.

Chen concludes that,

While I would not deny the sometimes dispiriting effect on me of back-breaking labor and my longing to return home, I can still say that spiritually and emotionally I was not as devastated as many authors of Cultural Revolution memoirs would have us believe everyone was (Chen, 74).

In a Lighthouse Together yet Worlds Apart

As noted in the introduction of the book, an interesting aspect of writing memoirs is how memory is connected with history. For these women, their memories of their experiences during the Cultural Revolution vary greatly. These differences allow for the complexities and variety of experiences for people growing up during the Cultural Revolution to be emphasized. For Zhang, as she recollected her past, what stood out the most were the relationships that she made, and then her reflections on gender equality, and what *zhiqing* meant for her in an opportunistic way. For Chen, when she was

recollecting the Mao era, she recalled most strongly her own struggle to balance the ideas of being “common” while at the same time often excelling more than her peers.

We can also see that for both of these women Maoist rhetoric played an important part in shaping their thoughts at the time, and also aided them in looking back and evaluating their experiences. For Zhang, Mao’s idea of sexual equality can be seen at the center of her developing little to no sense of gender identity. In school and on the farm, what mattered was ability and hard work, not if you were male or female. For Chen, her performing troupe was constantly being influenced and centered their performances on new sayings from Mao. It was Mao’s idea of reeducation that sticks out as most influential in her upbringing as it with that saying that Chen moved to the countryside and her life changed drastically.

Although both women were labeled as elitists and had to go to the countryside, the difference between classes, or urban and rural China, seemed to have a much greater impact on Chen than on Zhang. Zhang never spoke about any personal “movement” between the classes; it appears that since she was able to fit in so well in the countryside, besides the fact that she was granted more opportunities in life, she felt there were no other differences between her and her friends. But for Chen, she consistently talks about dual identities and paradoxical desires: “Thus I learned early to shift among multiple identities” (Chen, 61). She focused on how wanting to trust the masses and acknowledging that she was in fact the same as everyone always seemed to be in contrast to her desire to perform and hold a certain privileged position due to her exceptional work.

In working through a text based comparison, I understand how comparison can be “reciprocally illuminating” insofar as by comparing and contrasting these women’s experiences, I think I do understand better the intricacies of their situations. For me, in this context, comparison seems a great tool for exploring, or in fact, even discovering, the differences and complexities of each woman’s story.

The Relationship of Fieldwork and Textual Analysis to Comparison

I discovered through writing these two comparative essays that comparing texts is very different than comparing two living women. One question that I posited in the introduction that has not really been addressed yet is do different research methods influence how useful and how necessary comparative methods are to the project. What I want to examine is if there is any correlation between doing fieldwork and doing textual analysis that influences the skepticism towards comparative techniques. Because I had the opportunity to try both kinds of comparative projects, it seems to me that research techniques can influence the usefulness and appropriateness of comparison. In this way, I would argue that yes, research methods matter.

Perhaps it is not incidental that Geertz, one of the most vigorous advocates against comparison, is a fieldworker. I think in my situation, because of my time constraints and the fact that the information I learned about the women was limited, the comparative aspect of the paper gave me something ‘to do’. But if I had had more time to spend with the women, and thus had more opportunities to understand more deeply each of their situations, I am not sure that the comparison wouldn’t have hindered my ability to explore each woman and each woman’s unique and multifaceted situation.

In a text based situation, there is much less obstruction for comparative manipulation and much fewer consequences. When Jonathon Smith discusses the playfulness of comparative projects, in light of his usual text based comparisons, I understand why it is not as important for him to see the seriousness of his work. But for Hugh Urban, who is a fieldworker, the idea of taking comparison lightly is unacceptable and thus he is highly critical of Smith. Urban, instead of dismissing comparative projects as Geertz does, goes about addressing the issues involved in comparing by focusing on the serious implications that exist from the work. For both Geertz and Urban, I think the importance of their ideas is how fieldwork effects how they view comparative projects. Two very strong advocates of comparative methods, Max Weber and Claude Levi-Strauss stressed the need and utility of comparison in their work. Weber was never an advocate of fieldwork, and Levi-Strauss, after spending a short time in the field, dropped fieldwork saying it was 'woman's work' and then spent the rest of his career working with comparative methods.

For me, in writing these two comparative essays the most apparent difference was the comfort level I had while comparing respectively the people and the texts. After interviewing the women, whenever I would attempt to write something about them, I was constantly feeling hesitant. There seemed to be something too concrete in taking what they had said and turning it into a written comparative work. It is as if there was something in the comparison that could illuminate aspects of what they said in different ways than they had meant. Again, I am unsure if this is because I was unable to spend a lot of time with the women or if it was perhaps due to the fact that I was not ready for the

responsibility of any serious implications of my work, but I felt very uneasy with the idea of comparing them.

This seems to align me with both Geertz and Urban in that (like Geertz) I am uncomfortable with generalizations, but (like Urban) I am also uncomfortable not knowing what implications my work might have. Even while reading Jensen's article, what struck me is how if scholars were able to live in an academic bubble, and not have their work have any impact on the outside world, then I could see how to Jensen what we need is for scholars to stop reifying the idea of universals. But then I wonder, just because scholars are able to understand the temporary and abstract nature of universals and generalizations, I am not convinced that people outside of academia would have the same reactions. Therefore, what I can take away from Urban's article is the need to understand that our work can potentially be used outside of academia for purposes beyond just mental games. I understand the importance of being cautious of how our work could be construed.

For me, these issues went away with the text based comparison. I was not worried about how comparing the essays could possibly affect other people's ideas and feelings toward the women. But in doing the textual based comparison, I did not feel that what I was doing was comparing two women, but comparing what two women had written about themselves. To me, because they had already taken their stories and made them into a written work comparing them through writing seemed much less intrusive. For me, the distinction between writing a text based comparison and an ethnographic comparison was very important to understand how the appropriateness and utility of comparative techniques is influenced by research methodology.

Conclusion

I can honestly say that what is even more rewarding than completing this thesis, is what I learned in process of researching and writing it. There are three invaluable lessons I learned from this thesis. First, there is room in comparative projects for the differences to be emphasized and through highlighting these differences a much more complex picture of situations can be painted. Second, fieldwork cannot be a side project. A substantial amount of time must be allotted for any ethnographic work. And third, research methods are an important part of whether or not comparative techniques are useful in research.

For this thesis, I began by questioning whether or not comparative methods were useful or appropriate when researching cultural or religion and, as I mentioned above, I was quite skeptical. This skepticism continued during my research of the dialogue that scholars are now having as well as when I was writing my own comparative papers. I learned that some of my skepticism was necessarily valid, such as to whether or not comparative projects had to end in universals and generalizations. Through writing, I saw that comparing can actually be a great vehicle for drawing out and highlighting differences.

As stated above, I encountered many difficulties in doing the ethnographic fieldwork, which I think occurred mostly because I was trying to have it be a side project at the same time I was going to graduate school. Because of the problems I encountered in trying to set up meetings with the women I wanted to talk with, as well as consistently having scheduling problems with when they went to church, the amount of information I

gathered on the women, much to my dismay, was minimal. This lack of information and insight into the women's lives made me very hesitant to compare them. Again, one positive aspect of the comparing was that I was able to emphasize difference and thus not conclude with any broad generalizations or universals. But, after writing both comparative pieces, I realized that maybe it was the nature of a fieldwork-based project that led to my hesitancy to use comparative methods, and not the lack of information I had about the women.

The question I was most interested in was in the end, am I convinced of these methods? Do I find comparison "reciprocally illuminating" as Arvind Sharma does? Or will I continue to be skeptical about the usefulness of the methods? As it turns out, for me the answer is, of course, that it depends on the context. In a textual analysis, I see there is much to be gained, and little to be lost in comparing. But for ethnographic work, I am still unclear as to the utility of these methods. I think my biggest fear of writing about people is to portray them in a way that is not only inaccurate but also becomes concretized and representative of much more than it should. But again, I was able to use comparative methods to show difference and so I can see comparative methods allowing for more complexity and thus not allowing for such reification.

In my graduate research, I am focusing on globalization studies, which have, among many other things, begun to challenge existing concepts of the nature of fieldwork. No longer does it always make sense to be in just *one* place, globalization studies focus on the mobility of culture and people, so it is no longer inherent that culture has to be connected to just one specific place. I can see that as the notions of fieldwork change, perhaps the relations between fieldwork and comparative methods will also be

modified. If fieldwork is taking place in different places with different people, then the project becomes *comparative* in nature. It will be interesting to see how these changes and my next fieldwork project affect my stance on the utility of comparative methods.

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